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Inservice Education at a Distance: A Rural Consortium in Alabama

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Formal working agreements between individual school districts and institutions of higher learning are common throughout Alabama. However, cooperative agreements among local school districts to share mutually beneficial goods and services are somewhat rare. The rural Consortium (formally named the Northeast Alabama Consortium for Professional Development) described here comprises a group of Alabama educational institutions that have joined together to share resources and enhance educational opportunities for teachers and students.

Reasons for Development of the Consortium

The Consortium was formed as a result of the impact of three major factors. First, the Alabama State Board of Education's (SBE) resolutions requiring formal inservice programs forced local school districts to seek alternatives for providing quality staff development opportunities for teachers.

Historically, local school inservice training programs in Alabama have followed traditional patterns common in many states—one or two days devoted to general educational concerns, with intermittent faculty meetings dealing with day-to-day problems. While many Alabama school districts utilized this designated inservice time to good advantage, others were unable to design and maintain viable staff development activities for system personnel.

Based on the belief that well designed inservice programs enhance professional growth and improve teaching, the Alabama State Board of Education in 1972 approved a policy requiring each public school system to provide opportunities for continuous improvement for professional personnel. In 1979 the State Board approved the State Plan for Inservice Education/Professional Development, which provided the impetus for exploring innovative ways for organizing and delivering staff devel-

opment opportunities to educational personnel throughout Alabama. The following requirements were set up for local school systems:

1. Recognize the value of ongoing inservice education as a way of improving instruction to students.
2. Plan inservice activities based on a careful needs assessment of system teachers.
3. Utilize the resources of local school systems, the State Department of Education, public and private institutions of higher education, and special consultants.
4. Evaluate the inservice plan annually.

Second, factors related to geographic location and diverse needs forced some local school districts and institutions of higher learning to explore creative options for establishing good staff development programs at extended locations. As school systems across the state sought to implement the intent of the SBE policies requiring inservice programs, institutions of higher learning became prime focal points as suppliers of the human resources needed to deliver field based staff development opportunities across the state. Operationally, local school systems tapped the higher education personnel reservoir by randomly contacting individual faculty members to deliver inservice programs in specific areas on an as-needed basis. Few formal arrangements were made between institutions and local school systems.

Seven school systems in rural Northeast Alabama did enter into a formal agreement with The University of Alabama. The diverse inservice needs of these school systems, their rural settings, and the geographic distances involved (a radius of 150 miles from U of A campus) proved to be important factors in the decision to formalize a consortium arrangement. The seven school systems identified a wide range of inservice needs and sought to work with one of the state's comprehensive institutions of higher learning. Sheer distance between the Consortium school systems and The University of Alabama dictated an organizational arrangement that

would allow University personnel to provide services to more than one school system while they were in the Consortium area.

Third, lack of funding for the statewide inservice plan required local school districts to seek ways to fund recently mandated local staff development programs. The Alabama Legislature was unable to allocate funds to cover costs associated with the State Board of Education's mandate for statewide inservice education. Consequently, local school districts were expected to implement the inservice plan out of existing funds. The Consortium was designed to assist its members to provide quality inservice programs in the most cost effective manner possible. The consortium format permitted local school districts to share costs on a percentage basis, while at the same time offering to their employees expanded opportunities to participate in inservice sessions. University dollars were added to the Consortium based on credit participation. By agreeing to pool dollars, the Consortium solved the problems of funding and need for expanding inservice opportunities.

The presence of these key factors, plus the willingness of local school district and University administrators to work together, created a climate that was right for consortium development. From the beginning the Consortium was predicated on equal partnership and a commitment to an ongoing planning cycle.

Following a comprehensive needs assessment in the spring of 1979, the Consortium offered its first programs in the 1980-81 school year. During this initial year, the Consortium provided inservice education for 920 teachers and administrators. In 1981-82 the Consortium offered 45 different workshops and attracted 935 participants. In 1982-83 the Consortium was reduced to five systems, when the two systems most distant from the center of Consortium activities withdrew and formed staff development relationships with two regional institutions in their service area. Thirty workshops were offered and attendance was slightly over 900. In three years

of operation attendance at inservice sessions offered through the Northeast Consortium has totaled nearly 3,000.

Purpose of the Consortium

The Northeast Consortium was designed to be a non-credit inservice system of activities for classroom teachers and school administrators. System representatives expressed a strong desire that sessions reflect the practical needs of those whose task it is to educate children. The instructional emphasis in all sessions has been on the application of presented material to on-going school responsibilities.

Consortium sessions were designed for beginning teachers, who need practical introduction to school duties; for teachers who need professional growth based on staff evaluation procedures; and for those desiring to learn more about topics of interest. Sessions also were designed for school administrators that were specifically related to their needs in fiscal management, staff evaluation, curriculum coordination, effective leadership, and student discipline. Administrators have attended some of the teacher-oriented sessions as well. The association of teachers and administrators in the same classroom has fostered productive communication and cooperation between these two groups.

While the Consortium is concerned primarily with non-credit offerings, a credit option was developed for those interested in recertification or degree hours. For the past three years The University of Alabama has awarded graduate credit to those teachers who meet graduate admission standards and who attend 45 contact hours of Consortium activities, including workshop sessions, evaluation sessions, and other advisor-approved educational meetings or activities. The credit option has proved to be a viable way for persons who live 150 miles from the campus to receive graduate instruction and credit from The University of Alabama while employed in a full-time job. The practical nature of Consortium sessions lends itself to the problems/field work area of graduate study. A

credit option through the mechanism of the Consortium was viewed as being consistent with the previously discussed SBE staff development guidelines and recently implemented program approval guidelines, which encourage teacher education institutions to generate field-based opportunities for earning credit toward advanced degrees/certification. Efforts to ensure academic quality have led to a focus on personal assessment of professional growth needs, on the selection of professional growth experiences based upon this assessment, and on the generation of "so what/application" reactions to the experiences and their carry-over implementation in classroom/school settings. Efforts have been made to encourage administrative input by principals and curriculum supervisors in generating an information base for decisions as to which Consortium experiences should be selected by individual teachers, relative to that teacher's professional growth needs.

Design of Workshops and Delivery of Instruction

Consortium sessions generally are three hours long. Teachers consistently have chosen the 6:00-9:00 p.m. block as the favorite time for the sessions, and Tuesday night has emerged as the night which seems to offer the fewest conflicts with home, church, and school sponsored activities. Some sessions, such as art activity workshops, have been scheduled in blocks up to six hours in length (usually Saturdays) to accommodate the special needs of particular topics.

The Consortium delivery methods continue to be upgraded. During the first two years of the Consortium, there was no pattern as to when or where sessions were to be offered. Programs were held on different nights and at various times and locations throughout the Consortium districts. The administration of the Consortium from the University, 150 miles away, became difficult to manage.

In an effort to overcome randomness and provide added structure to the offerings, a modular approach was implemented for 1982-83. This

approach involved the delivery of six three-hour workshops at a Consortium school located in each of the five member school systems. Five blocks of six sessions were held. Each block was held on a Tuesday night from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. This service delivery design seemed to have several advantages: First, it insured that each participating system would have equal representation in allocation of sessions. Second, participants would not necessarily have to drive long distances to attend sessions. Third, presenters would not have to drive separately, but could ride in a University van from a central location, increasing cost-effectiveness. Fourth, participants had only five dates to remember.

An additional modification led to scheduling all evening sessions prior to the Thanksgiving holidays. It was reasoned that effective teacher inservice education should have an effect on teacher behavior in the classroom; for this to occur, sessions should be offered as soon as possible in the school year.

Also incorporated into Consortium scheduling for the 1982-83 programs were all individual system inservice days, which were open to any interested Consortium participant. As a means of further encouraging participation in inservice activities across system lines, the systems moved in the direction of common inservice days. This has made it possible to employ a limited number of nationally recognized inservice consultants to work with Consortium teachers and administrators. Topics of interest offered through weekend programs at The University of Alabama Gadsden Center and at the University campus in Tuscaloosa have been made available to interested participants. While evening programs end before Thanksgiving, these other Consortium components allow inservice participation throughout the school year.

Delivery Considerations

In support of the Consortium, The University of Alabama Division of Continuing Education annu-

ally provides to the Northeast Consortium a series of services, beginning with an assessment of staff development needs each spring. Following an analysis of the data, Consortium representatives from each system meet with Continuing Education representatives to decide on a tentative schedule of workshop offerings, instructors, locations, and times.

During the summer months instructors are contacted and a form for teacher sign-up is designed. On institute day (a work day for teachers), the forms are distributed to teachers, who make their selections from the various workshops offered. Each teacher keeps a copy of the sign-up form and fills out a duplicate form so that both the local board of education and the Division of Continuing Education may know how many persons to expect at each session.

Instructors for Consortium sessions are provided with appropriate audiovisual equipment, handouts, class rolls, and course evaluations by the Division of Continuing Education. All honoraria and travel expenses are paid by the Division. Local systems are billed for their share of Consortium expenses, based on the number of employees in each system following the last Consortium session.

The Consortium has proved to be a good investment for the participating school systems. Each year the inservice activities provided have cost only about \$5.00 per participant. The participating systems have found this cost to be within their budgeting capabilities. Without the pooling of resources made possible by the Consortium arrangements, the wide variety of inservice experiences would have amounted to many times the cost of the combined efforts.

A concern which emerged early in the planning of the Consortium was the desire of both local education agency personnel and selected College of Education personnel to develop credit/noncredit options in the consortium offerings. All previous off-campus offerings which carried credit options had consisted of didactic courses offered by University

instructional personnel or carefully screened adjunct personnel who normally had a terminal degree. The format of consortium offerings deviated from this more traditional delivery format in the utilization of instructors from several sources, a number of them selected from non-college positions. While the concept of utilizing field-based teacher educators was supported, the position was taken that a majority of the Consortium offerings in any one year would be delivered by college or university-based personnel.

Benefits of the Consortium

The consortium concept has provided each of its constituencies with a number of benefits. The Division of Continuing Education has been able to achieve its mission of serving nontraditional adult students in a relevant way and to provide quality educational services. The local school systems have realized a number of benefits, including the following:

1. A wide variety of inservice and professional development activities that ordinarily would be beyond the capacity of a single school system to offer.
2. An affordable implementation of the SBE inservice requirements.
3. Closer cooperation and communication across school district lines.
4. Identification of and access to a pool of excellent resource persons, consultants, and presenters who otherwise could not be made available.
5. The availability of college credit options to teachers in a rural area that is not close to an institution of higher learning.

The College of Education also has benefited from participation in the Consortium:

1. The Consortium has generated contact between University and local system personnel which has had a positive effect on student recruitment.
2. The involvement of college personnel with personnel in local school systems has resulted in a

number of continuing consultative / program development relationships which move beyond those offered by the Consortium.

3. The increased involvement of college personnel in local systems has opened up communication relative to program improvement needs of the college as perceived by personnel at the school and system levels. The rural nature of the systems served by the Consortium emphasizes the need for the college to increase its efforts to recognize the special needs of rural schools in its basic teacher preparation programs.

4. In terms of staff development, college personnel have benefited from contact with the nationally known resource persons brought in for various Consortium programs.

Mutuality of interests and benefits are what bring members of a consortium together and keep them together. The Northeast Consortium for Professional Development has proved to be an excellent way for educational groups to pool their resources for the benefit of all concerned.

A Look Ahead

A number of possibilities are under consideration for the direction of Consortium services in the future. Among these is increased involvement of teachers and principals in the planning of offerings through membership in an advisory body. Several special-interest seminars have been considered which would be structured to provide continuity of instruction in areas which need extra attention, such as a seminar for the first year teacher, or a "master teacher seminar." Some Consortium activities might be offered either during the school year or in the afternoon hours following the close of school.

However the Consortium changes in the years ahead, what is important is that all parties continue to be actively concerned and involved in the planning and growth of its services. Beyond the benefits of inservice opportunities, cooperation and communication are what the Consortium is about.